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# **Inventing the environmental state: Neoliberal common sense and the limits to transformation**

Sophia Hatzisavvidou

*Department of Politics, Languages and International Studies, University of Bath, Bath, UK*

[s.hatzisavvidou@bath.ac.uk](mailto:s.hatzisavvidou@bath.ac.uk)

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The neoliberal nature of the environmental state prevents a transformation to long-term sustainability. Taking the case of Britain, I scrutinise the rhetorical invention of the environmental state by identifying and analysing the commonplaces that informed political arguments for environmental policymaking between 1997-2015. The analysis shows that the rhetoric of the British environmental state is grounded on neoliberal commonplaces, which entails an understanding of environmental problems and solutions that precludes actual transformation. Ultimately, neoliberalism functions as a glass ceiling to radical environmental transformation; a transformative rhetoric informed by commonplaces different to those of neoliberalism is paramount to the institution of a counter-hegemonic ecological paradigm.

Keywords: environmental state, neoliberalism, rhetorical analysis, sustainability, transformation

‘People have to have a language to speak about where they are and what other possible futures are available to them’ (Hall 2016, p. 205)

## **Introduction**

The analytical concept of the environmental state was coined in academic discourse to give conceptual expression to the emergence of environmental management as an integral function of the modern state. This operational scheme takes the form of specialised administrative, regulatory, financial, and knowledge structures that aim at organising and orchestrating environmental and social–environmental interactions (Duit et al 2016). Considering the conditions of its emergence and function, the environmental state is one manifestation of the advanced modern capitalist state, along with ‘the security state’, ‘the developmental state’, ‘the surveillance state’, and ‘the welfare state’ (Craig 2016; Meadowcroft 2005; Gough and Meadowcroft 2011). As a manifestation of the capitalist state, the environmental state is distinct from the ideal ecological or green state that would give precedence to the environment over the economy (Duit 2016). A particularly interesting and less explored issue is the relation between the environmental and the neoliberal state, namely the state that favours a good business climate and the integrity of the financial system over other collective goods (Harvey 2005; Plant 2010). The neoliberal environmental state is characterised by weak environmental capacity, intervention, and institutionalisation of environmental values, as well as low commitment to biocentric values and social and environment welfare (Christoff 2005). As Christoff argues, the advent of neoliberal organisational principles and methods impacted the environmental capacities of the modern state.

The present analysis focuses not on the operational structures and institutions of the neoliberal state qua environmental state in general, but specifically on how neoliberalism as a governing rationality permeated policy language on environmental issues in Britain, one of the main strongholds of neoliberalism. Using a distinct approach to the study of political language that focuses on its *inventional* nature, I scrutinise the rhetorical invention of the British environmental state, a process that took the form of re-inventing the state by ‘greening’ institutional frameworks, mechanisms, and social practices. With the re-invention of the state seen as an integral aspect of responding to transboundary environmental problems (Eckersley 2004, p. 3), the study of the language through which this process is materialised is an important step towards understanding the virtues and limits of the environmental state. This is because of the double role that language has in processes of social and political change: it is constitutive of change, but it is also the site where change is reflected (Hatzisavvidou 2017).

The argument offered here has three elements. First, the process of re-inventing the state in a greener direction took the form of rhetorical invention, namely of devising ways to articulate, define, and constitute relations between social agents and their environments and practices, ultimately aiming to create and forge a particular environmental common sense. Second, this process of rhetorical invention filtered into the fundamental tenets of neoliberalism, by way of appealing to three neoliberal commonplaces: economic valuation, efficiency, and competitiveness. Finally, this profoundly shaped the form and function of the British environmental state, preventing it from achieving a transformation into long-term sustainability.

This analysis diagnoses the causes of the *failure* of the British state to achieve environmental transformation in the rhetorical resources that informed, grounded, and oriented the language used in crafting and communicating environmental policy. This is not

to suggest that politics takes place only on a discursive terrain, disentangled from material factors and conditions; rather, it is to suggest that the way an organising idea is rhetorically constructed and argued for is indicative of the sources and dynamics that participate in the process of social and political transformation that this idea puts forward. Ideas have consequences and so does the language used to express and support them (Weaver 1948). In the case under scrutiny, the idea that Britain must be transformed in a ‘greener’ direction functioned as compass for inventing the environmental state. I show that the language used to communicate this idea as policy aim reflects the limitations of this transformation: the grounding of the idea of ecological transformation on neoliberal commonplaces precludes actual transformation.

The discussion is organised in three sections. First, I set the context for the empirical analysis by showing how the environmental state is—in its logic and function—a manifestation of the neoliberal state. I also discuss the connection between the use of a pervasive web of concepts and ideas, on the one hand, and the production of common sense, on the other. The invention of a dominant socio-political paradigm requires a conceptual constellation that can forge and organise a common understanding of challenges and solutions. Second, I briefly introduce the approach of rhetorical analysis used here: what makes it distinct is that it attends to the *inventional* aspect of language and its role in producing and disseminating political ideas. Drawing on material collected for a larger project, I focus on a selection of policy documents and political speeches, tracing the stream of rhetoric that shaped the British environmental state, namely the ideas that infused it and the mechanisms and practices invented to substantiate it. Analysis shows that the invention of the British environmental state was rhetorically founded on the neoliberal commonplaces: economic valuation, efficiency, and competitiveness. Third, I argue that neoliberalism and the web of ideas and commonplaces that structures public understanding of environmental

problems and solutions can be visualised as a glass ceiling that prevents radical environmental transformation. Even though language alone does not produce change, turning to rhetorical resources and ideas other than those offered by the neoliberal rationality is essential to enable alternative ecological visions and their vocabularies to gain prominence. The process of inscribing such visions and vocabularies into policy making requires abandoning existing argumentative resources and redefining the commonplaces that dominate environmental debates and collective imaginaries.

## **Neoliberalism and the Invention of Common Sense**

A common point of reference in intellectual histories of neoliberalism is that its origins, temporal and spatial trajectories, and practices of materialisation are characterised by great diversity (Burgin 2012; Peck 2010; Stedman Jones 2012). What is today broadly brushed as neoliberalism has many different strands, including German ordoliberalism, American human capital theory, and the ‘Washington consensus’ of the IMF and World Bank (Chambers 2018, p. 707). In the transatlantic context, though, neoliberalism can be defined as ‘the free market ideology based on individual liberty and limited government that connected human freedom to the actions of the rational, self-interested actor in the competitive marketplace’ (Stedman Jones 2012, 2). Historically, neoliberalism emerged during the interwar period as a nuanced response to conditions such as the experience of war, depression, and totalitarianism, but also the rise of universal suffrage, the welfare state, and trade unions (Stedman Jones 2012, pp. 2–4). The intellectual movement associated with neoliberalism—prominent figures of which were Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman—aimed to defend and re-invent liberalism, in search of the ideal way of organising the economy while protecting individual freedoms. Among the central tenets of this movement was market liberalisation and deregulation, monetarism, and fiscal discipline in the domains of trade policy and development;

remodelling the state to ensure that its policy institutions and agencies would be compatible with the market ethos was closely connected to the materialisation of these neoliberal ideas (Davies 2016; Stedman Jones 2012). Indeed, the process of neoliberalisation took the form of a project of radical reconfiguration of state institutions and practices (Harvey 2005, p. 78). In Britain this process culminated under Thatcher's premiership and appeared as the legitimisation of the freedom of the market and the creation of favourable conditions for investment opportunities by privatising public assets and services, such as utilities and social housing. Neoliberalism, then, emerged first and foremost as a project of state transformation not least because, as Plant (2010, p. 1) notes, it is the state 'that gives neoliberalism its coherence and cogency'.

The assumption that freedom of the market and of trade can guarantee individual freedoms is a cardinal element of the neoliberal state. As a result, the neoliberal state embodies freedoms that 'reflect the interests of private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital' (Harvey 2005, p. 7). The focus on creating a 'good business climate' and securing the freedom of the market, Harvey (2005, pp. 70–71) notes, entails that the neoliberal state prioritises these goals over, say, the limited capacity of the environment to regenerate itself or environmental quality. Nonetheless, as Davies (2016) compellingly argues, the actual marker of neoliberalism is not freedom of the market per se, but rather economic valuation and its associated techniques and measures. This is because quantification removes ambiguity, 'emptying politics of its misunderstanding and ethical controversies' and 'reducing political ideals to preferences, eliminating the distinction between a moral stance and a desire' (Davies 2016, p. 8). In other words, the rationalising process of quantification that neoliberalism relies upon contributes decisively to its legitimisation and the establishment of its authority beyond dissent.

Neoliberalism is more than a set of state policies or a stage of capitalism; hence its gripping effect on social and political structures and practices, as well as its ability to eradicate dissent. Foucault's (2008) understanding of neoliberalism as a normative order of reason, as a particular type of rationality in the art of governing, is illuminating here. Drawing on his work, Wendy Brown (2015, p. 30) suggests that neoliberalism can be understood as 'an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life'. This view of neoliberalism as governing rationality that seeks to advance economic valuation and ultimately to remake subjects—citizens, rulers, markets, and states—as well as how they relate to each other, points to neoliberalism's pervasiveness; it also calls to attention its embeddedness in political culture through language. This is because as governing rationality neoliberalism needs a distinct vocabulary that constitutes, organises, and reproduces the framework within which its new subjects and relations are created and that carries it forward as common sense. As Onge (2017, p. 301) observes, neoliberalism functions not merely as a set of arguments or terms, but rather as 'a comprehensive discourse' that shapes all major discussions in public life.

The language of governing rationality filters into common sense, the site where consent is grounded, as Antonio Gramsci points out. Although the introduction of institutions, measures, and mechanisms is central to the establishment of a paradigm, it is not sufficient to make it the dominant governing rationality. In order to become hegemonic, any socio-political project must become embedded in the public's common sense through 'practices of cultural socialisation' (Harvey 2005, 39). According to Gramsci (1971, p. 191), common sense is 'the traditional popular conception of the world – what is unimaginatively called “instinct”'. Common sense refers to the uncritical, disjointed, and episodic way of perceiving and understanding the world, which Gramsci sees as the outcome of imposition 'by the external



environment, i.e. by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved' (Gramsci 1971, p. 323). Common sense has a negative nuance, not least because it renders individuals vulnerable to the will and dictates of society's most powerful groups. Although common sense has its origins in what Gramsci calls 'good sense' and functions by providing orientation to people in their attempt to make sense of and deal with the world, ultimately it becomes obsolete and unresponsive to practical problems and so it turns into 'an obstacle to the correspondence of thought and action since individuals conceive their activity through beliefs drawn from previous experiences' (Martin 1998, pp. 100–101). For Gramsci, the role of language here is paramount: language contributes decisively to the popularisation and legitimisation of projects that aspire to become hegemonic through a process of manufacturing consent.

Common sense, then, is the site where the hegemony of socio-political projects is played out. As Harvey (2005, p. 5) observes, the crystallisation of a project requires a conceptual constellation that appeals to the public's values, desires, intuitions, and instincts. In other words, any such project requires a vocabulary or lexicon that must not only acquire a prominent status, but it must indeed become part of the public's every day, fundamental understanding of the social world and its relation to it, by connecting its beliefs, hopes, and expectations with the ideological premises of the project. There is, then, an immanent link between the ideological production of a socio-political project and the terms employed for organising relations between its different constituencies; this link is indispensable for the process of making this project hegemonic.

Stuart Hall (1979) showed how the Thatcherite neoliberal project became common sense in Britain by weaving together ideological commitments and discourses that resonated with the expectations of the classes it aspired to represent. This particular project succeeded in integrating neoliberal concepts and ideas into the public's conception of political and

economic life due to its ability to mould popular common sense through the establishment of a series of conceptual connections between terms and social practices (e.g. ‘nation’ and ‘people’ in the place of ‘class’ and ‘unions’, or ‘self-reliant’ against ‘welfare scavenger’) (Hall 1979, p. 16). Hall argues that the Thatcherite neoliberal state exploited the historical conjuncture—the economic crisis of the 1970s, the contradictions within social democracy, the radical right’s effectiveness in addressing real problems—to exercise its grip on public culture. To achieve this aim, it infused the public with its logic by telling its own story of economic progress, growth, and national unity in terms that enacted its own adherence to the principles of individualism, entrepreneurialism, financialisation, competition, and deregulation as an antidote to inflation and unemployment. In Britain one of the aims of Thatcher’s neoliberal project was ‘to make us think in and speak its language as if there were no other’—a project, Hall (1998) argues, later taken up by Tony Blair. Integrating its language into popular opinion or common understanding of public issues by utilising the press’s support, neoliberalism actively shaped the common sense of the British public.

The case of the British environmental state and production of green common sense serves as a potent point of relay here. Historically, Conservative governments have seen environmental regulation as an impediment to economic development. As a result, in the 1980s Britain was seen an environmental laggard, the ‘Dirty Man of Europe’ that prevented the development of effective European environmental policy (Humphrey 2003, p. 304). Even Thatcher’s 1989 so-called ‘greening’ is received primarily as a political tactic whereby she demonstrated responsiveness to public concerns over the environment and less as the result of a true ideological turn towards ecologism (McCormick 1991). However, a combination of international developments—requirements to implement the indicators of sustainable development, the growing scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change, and the raising profile of the unfolding environmental crisis—and political expediency resulted in the

‘greening’ of British parties in the 1990s. This culminated in the aspirations expressed by the two dominant political figures of the era in which the British environmental state as set of mechanisms, institutions, and practices took its form: Blair’s aspiration to render Britain ‘a global environmental leader’ and Cameron’s to lead ‘the greenest government ever’.

The increasing acknowledgment of the need to integrate environmental concerns into public political discourse created the need for modalities of talking about the environment that not only would not contradict the norms of the neoliberal state, but they would actually reflect, reproduce, and reinforce them. Any tools or measures devised to address environmental problems in the context of the neoliberal state—e.g. eco-taxes and tradable permits (Jordan et al 2013)—by definition ought to satisfy at least two conditions: first, to be congruent with the freedom of markets and investors, and second to integrate quantitative facts that can be subjected to economic rationality. The first condition enables the expansion and materialisation of economic competition in a new domain, namely nature; the second ensures that environmental policies are quantifiable, measurable, and therefore beyond dispute. The adoption of market-oriented mechanisms such as emissions trading in environmental policymaking is constitutive of the project of neoliberalism (Felli 2015; Newell 2012). As the discussion in this section showed, the language through which such policy measures are carried forward matters for the establishment of the hegemony of neoliberalism as governing paradigm. It is because of the way that language orients the public’s understanding and forges common sense, as Gramsci and Hall show, that the discursive modalities employed by the neoliberal state are paramount to the orientation of environmental consciousness in a certain direction, side-lining competing environmental sensibilities, visions, and vocabularies. The British environmental state and the common sense that would accompany and support it in popular conceptions of effective responses to

environmental challenges had to be invented, not only through policies and institutional mechanisms, but—perhaps primarily—rhetorically.

## **The Rhetorical Invention of the British Environmental State**

### ***Rhetoric and Invention***

Agents of environmental discourse do not merely contribute to the design of environmental policies, institutions, and mechanisms; they also materialise aspects of environmental management by discursively constructing and arguing for them. These argumentative practices produce the discursive grid within which policies and initiatives are designed and implemented. At the same time, they also shape public perceptions of what constitutes an environmental problem and how to address it; in other words, they forge green common sense. The study of environmental political discourse reveals how social actors understand or envision their relation to natural environment (Larson 2011); how they seek to address challenges through climate leadership (Eckersley 2016); and how ethical and ideological convictions shape attempts to control, manage, or respond to such challenges (Coffey and Marston 2013; Gillard 2016). The study of the language of the environmental state offers insight into the discursive elements that dominate political debates on how to achieve transition to a collective sustainable future, as well as the ideological underpinnings of these debates.

To create an appealing argument, one must first invent what is persuasive within a given context and then guide the audience from familiar ideas, perceptions, or beliefs to new or emerging ones. This process is not the outcome of an individual agent's rhetorical ingenuity or labour, but a collective process in the sense that it draws on concepts and ideas from a wider tradition or context within which the rhetor is situated and which constrains, but does

not necessarily dictate or proscribe, practice (Jasinski 1997). Furthermore, because political actors try to reach for audiences that lie outside their own systems of belief, the process of inventing political arguments is a creative task that entails synthesising different forms of knowledge and techniques in order to achieve a wider appeal. For those who study politics, then, the study of rhetorical invention calls to attention the mechanisms that participate in the creation of political arguments and can illuminate ‘not just the internal coherence of a discourse but the way that speech is assembled in response to specific situations’ (Martin 2014, pp. 99–100). In other words, the study of rhetorical invention enables the study of strategic interventions that aim to rhetorically construct or reinterpret a given situation.

An essential tool used in the process of rhetorical invention is topics or commonplaces. In the rhetorical tradition, a topic was literally ‘a general head or line of argument which suggested material from which proofs could be made’ (Corbett 1965, p. 24). Topics can be understood as reservoirs for ideas and images that allow ‘the rhetor to become engaged in particular situations in a creative way’ (Consigny 1974, p. 182). A commonplace is the nodal point that constitutes a series of arguments into a concise and appealing narrative that can be circulated and reproduced in order to popularise and legitimise a political project.

The study of commonplaces as *inventional resources* is at the core of the analysis offered here. This approach resonates with the spirit of rhetorical political analysis, a methodology of studying political language that affirms uncertainty and contestation as inexorable elements of politics (Finlayson 2007; Martin and Finlayson 2008; Finlayson 2014). People have different understandings of fundamental organising terms of public life, such as ‘freedom’ or ‘justice’; therefore, any process of collective judgement formation and decision-making involves the task of creating consensus. This task takes the form of a process of reason giving, of articulating arguments that justify the need to follow one course of action over another. This discursive process entails the definition of subject positions and the negotiation

of power relations between them. Consequently, rhetoric is not merely a tool for meaning-making and interpreting, but rather ‘the very mode and organising principle that circulates power relations, valuations, and logics’ (Nguyen 2017, p. 7). To study rhetoric is to identify attempts to forge political consent within the wider context in which they emerge. Therefore, and unlike other approaches (e.g. those inspired by linguistics) to the study of public discourse, rhetorical inquiry attends to language not in order to ‘reveal’ or demystify hidden ideological meanings, but rather to examine how rhetorical phenomena are imbricated in the attempt to present certain ideological positions—here the neoliberal one—as natural, contributing to the prevalence of this certain position as indisputable, as common sense. By concentrating on language in situated events and encounters, rhetorical inquiry attends to social change as a process interweaving agency and structure (Martin 2014). It thus considers both the specific social position of the agent of language and the spatial-temporal context within which she strategically intervenes and conveys meaning.

The rhetorical practices that marked the invention of the British environmental state are documented in political speeches, policy documents, and reports. Political speeches are of particular interest: as Martin and Finlayson (2008, p. 452) argue, they can function as ‘a point of connection between politicians, citizens, and political institutions’ and therefore their study can shed light on how ideologies, institutions, and politicians co-contribute to the reproduction and transformation of political life. The present analysis draws material from a selection of political speeches delivered between 1997-2015 by former prime ministers Tony Blair and David Cameron and deputy prime minister Nick Clegg. We studied speeches specifically about the environment, leaving aside speeches in which the environment is mentioned briefly as one area of policy among others. By focusing on political leaders’ ‘green speeches’ we can understand more fully their ideas about environmental issues, because it is precisely in these speeches that they take the time to develop these ideas in depth. In

conducting the analysis, we identified the commonplaces that these leaders used to construct and arrange their arguments for environmental sustainability. We chose to include in this analysis only speeches that addressed national audiences. These speeches are instances of rhetorical invention, but they do not exhaust the discourse that contributed to the rhetorical invention of the environmental state in Britain. Other texts, namely policy documents and related reports, play an important role in framing, complementing, and substantiating the content of public addresses and therefore we expanded our analysis to such texts. We use, then, the methodological frame and spirit of rhetorical inquiry to study public language beyond speeches and to attend to the rhetorical—inventive and persuasive—functions that these texts perform. Therefore, we treat as agents of rhetoric not merely politicians but also institutions, since it is their mechanisms, practices, and regulations that materialised environmental policy. In bringing these diverse texts together as an instance of rhetorical intervention we track the evolution of the public discourse that contributed to the invention of the British environmental state, as well as mark its presuppositions and limitations.

### ***The Neoliberal Rhetoric of the British Environmental State***

The agents of the rhetoric of the environmental state alluded to, popularised, and reinforced a number of commonplaces of neoliberalism. For the sake of space, the discussion here focuses on three powerful commonplaces that capture the spirit of neoliberalism: economic valuation, efficiency, and competitiveness. These key neoliberal markers functioned both as reservoirs for arguments that introduced or supported environmental policy and as organising principles for the implementation of regulations. They created the operating framework of environmental policy and they became part of political debate and public vocabulary through media. As governments implemented environmental policy appealing to neoliberal

commonplaces, they shaped society's perception of environmental and sustainability issues and moulded green common sense.

### *Economic valuation*

The logic of economic valuation lies at the heart of the neoliberal governing rationality; it is also the logic that informed the rhetoric of the environmental state in Britain between 1997-2015. The use of quantitative economic evaluation in the design of environmental policies aimed at legitimising them through their conformity with the economic rationality of the free market (Davies 2016). As a result, claims around environmental problems and sustainability issues—the 'green agenda'—were formulated as arguments about the profitability of relevant activities and the importance of measuring environmental impact.

Already in his first speech on the environment as prime minister, Blair (1997) defined the 'green agenda' as an opportunity for businesses: 'To be modern is to be green. It is [...] about working with business to ensure that our companies and industry are able to take advantage of the huge opportunities that markets for new technologies offer.' This argument, invented based on the logic of profitability, captures the spirit of ecological modernisation, the model of green political economy practiced by New Labour that focuses on the role of the market and innovation (Barry and Paterson 2004). This argument became a central tenet of New Labour environmental policy, with Blair (2000) repeating in his speech to the conference organised by the Confederation of British Industry and Green Alliance: 'we should see protecting the environment as a business opportunity'. Operating within a neoliberal framework means that environmental protection is seen as 'investment' that will be 'worth every penny in the long-term' (Blair 2003). It means, in other words, that environmental action is about expanding economic activity to nature and about assessing and managing environmental problems using economic valuation. In effect, the language of



valuation employed by Blair in line with ecological modernisation reduced environmental problems to pricing metrics and solutions to these problems to assessments of profitability, while diminishing social considerations (Knox-Hayes 2015).

The commonplace of valuation also permeated texts produced by environmental institutions. The Environment Agency (2005) made a turn to ‘modern regulation’, that is regulation focused on outcomes with less regulation and emphasis on ‘measuring performance’, with companies required to ‘provide quantified information on the significant environmental risks’ of their activities. The same spirit prevailed under the Coalition government (2010-2015). In 2011 the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA 2011b) published the ‘first White Paper on the natural environment for over 20 years’, a document in which nature is presented as ‘the foundation of sustained economic growth’ and that provides the backbone for environmental policy making, using valuations provided in the UK National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA). The 2011 White Paper placed economic valuation of natural resources and processes, such as coastal wetlands and pollination, at the heart of policy making, congruent with the coalition government’s vision for a transition to a green economy. The credo of this economic formation was maximising ‘economic growth, whilst decoupling it from impacts on the environment’ and acknowledged that ‘(n)atural capital is an essential part of a productive economy and we need to value appropriately the goods and services it provides’ (DEFRA 2011a). The same logic infused DEFRA’s (2013b) publication on Sustainable Development Indicators which provided an assessment of sustainability measures, completed with graphs, statistics, and economic valuations of ‘assets’ such as ‘human capital’, ‘physical capital’ and ‘environmental goods and services’. The neoliberal commonplace of economic valuation functioned as a tank for arguments for quantification and marketisation that gave form and shape to the British environmental state.

## *Efficiency*

Neoliberalisation manifests also as an argument for efficiency. ‘Right’ or ‘fair’ courses of action are determined through calculations and evaluations in the quantitative language of efficiency (Davies 2016, p. 23). The problem with the logic of efficiency—which emphasises measuring how to best implement predetermined goals—is not merely that it is in tension with the logic of democracy; it is that by emphasising technology and market-based solutions, efficiency ultimately reduces environmental issues to concerns about resource consumption and waste emissions, thereby neglecting or masking other dimensions of the problem (Blühdorn 2007).

The logic of efficiency permeated the modernisation agenda of New Labour (Barry and Paterson 2004). Outlining his government’s steps, Blair (2001) argued that they initiated a ‘radical’ approach to ensure efficient use of energy in combination with investment in green technologies, which would render Britain ‘a leading player in the coming green industrial revolution’. Blair justified the virtue of this revolution by appealing to the financial worth of alternative energy markets—‘a new market worth over £500million’—and evaluations of financially incentivised emission trading schemes. In 2001 government founded the Carbon Trust, ‘a business-led organisation charged with bringing forward cutting edge climate change technologies’ (Blair 2003). By inventing rhetorically and materially an efficiency-oriented approach to environmental problems, Blair created also the need for markets and technologies that would facilitate the achievement of this principle.

The principle of efficiency and the imperative to ‘go green’ through marketisation was intensified following the 2008 financial crisis, when ecological imperatives and economic development seemed irreconcilable and the vision of green economy provided a promising alternative (Ferguson 2015). The coalition government employed the vision of ‘green growth’

amidst a climate of austerity in its attempt to reconcile economic with ecological demands, with Clegg (2012) proposing that this could both help ‘hard-pressed families with their bills’ and create a business environment that would ‘be generating jobs and wealth for years to come’. Efficiency became the commonplace for arguments for transformation: efficient consumption of energy, efficient spending, and efficient preservation of resources; ‘lean times can be green times’ (Clegg 2012). In his only ‘green speech’—which ultimately took the form of short remarks—Cameron (2012) argued that meeting ‘our growing energy demands in a way that protects our planet’ is a challenge that can be addressed by making ‘investment in renewable energy... financially sustainable’. Producing energy efficiently by investing in renewables is one of the key policy prescriptions of the ‘green economy’ (Tienhaara 2014).

Although environmental speeches during this period were scarce, public documents further highlight the link between efficiency and ‘green economy’. In a document that outlines its strategy for sustainable development, government committed to ‘lead by example’, introducing measures for more efficient consumption and waste production, aiming to ‘put the UK on a path to strong, sustainable, and balanced growth’, and introducing a rigorous information mechanism that would ‘allow constant scrutiny of progress and performance’ (DEFRA 2011a). In line with the principle of ‘modern regulation’ introduced in 2005, the Environment Agency (2013) reinstated its regulatory role in facilitating businesses to ‘avoid waste’, ‘drive innovation’, and find ‘more efficient ways of using resources and stimulating the development of new technologies, which can reduce costs and create new markets’. The commonplace of efficiency thus functioned as a core reference point to the rhetorical invention of the British environmental state, becoming a criterion of judgment for action, reconciling it with what works well for the business environment.

### *Competitiveness*

Efficient policymaking and action, quantified and measured, is tied with competitiveness. The idea of competitiveness encapsulates the logic of national productivity, or a country's capacity to generate wealth, as well as the ability to extend this capacity into the future and translate it into prosperity. Ultimately, Davies (2016, p. 109) observes, the neoliberal paradigm invites the integration of scientific knowledge and economic investment in order to inform governance that paves the way for global leadership, a vision that Blair alluded to persistently in his speeches. A central component of this vision was technological optimism and the invitation to actors from industry and business to invest in British scientific enterprise. As Blair (2003) argued in a speech on sustainable development, 'there are clear economic advantages for Britain in taking the lead... the possibilities of scientific advance are there. But they do require urgent investment'. Blair (2006) proposed that this call for merging scientific and entrepreneurial activity was pivotal to the country's future economic stability as it would enable addressing climate change, a challenge that 'can only be beaten by motivated and dedicated scientists'. This image of science and technology as prime drivers of British green leadership in the global competition served well the needs of the neoliberal state for 'experts' who have the ability to produce quantitative facts that can be used to justify its policies in indisputable ways. At the same time, trust in the reason of scientific inquiry resonated with the New Labour modernisation agenda and the attempt to further neoliberalise the state, including its environmental mechanisms.

In the years of austerity that followed the economic crisis, emphasis shifted towards enhancing the competitiveness of the British economy. This is evident in Clegg's 2012 speech, where he presented the ability to compete 'successfully in the global low carbon market' and 'to attract billions of pounds worth of outside investment to the UK' as a way of recovering from the financial crisis. In this era of recovery, the environment was seen as providing an opportunity for restarting the economy in a greener mode. Government founded

the Green Investment Bank, ‘an enduring and effective financial institution, and a world leader in financing green infrastructure’ with the mission of playing a key role in the implementation of government’s commitment to sustainable development (DEFRA 2013a). The choice of the name and operational structure of this mechanism is indicative of how the neoliberal governing rationality perceives sustainability-related issues: mechanisms and institutions designed to deliver sustainability measures have to adapt to the logic and vocabulary of the free market economy and foster competition. The coalition government’s failure to deliver on its promise to move UK businesses to a green economy as envisioned (DEFRA 2011a) provides an example of why the ‘green economy’ is more fable than attainable aim. Indeed, the irreducibility of the need to evaluate and quantify every aspect of life that permeates neoliberal logic renders ‘green economy’ incompatible with green transformation. Actual transformation towards sustainability would have to take a form very different than the green economy envisaged by agents of neoliberal rhetoric.

### **Re-Inventing the Environmental State**

No social, economic, or political project is hegemonic forever. Change is always a possibility and the role of language in this process is indispensable. As Hall (2016, p. 205) observes, no paradigm shift can be materialised unless ‘people have a language to speak about where they are and what other possible futures are available to them’. This is because the design and pursuit of alternative ecological, social, and political visions is intertwined with the availability of a vocabulary that provides the means to sustain and forward such visions. Hence the instrumental role of rhetoric as process of invention: it creates shared vocabularies that communicate and forge collective values and courses of action.

Undoubtedly, language does not exhaust reality. But as a meaning-making process it contributes to the creation of elements—agency, structure, and knowledge—that make reality

tangible. Although language alone is inadequate to generate social change, ‘rhetorical innovations facilitate the advancement of new political strategies and projects’ (Torfing 2005, p. 5). Any project that aspires to change *requires* a transformative rhetoric that can displace the hegemonic embeddedness of neoliberal common sense in the collective grasp and articulation of the environmental crisis and project a less exploitative, more sustainable alternative to it. As discussed, the commonplaces that inform an idea are important, because they function as ‘tanks’ for arguments on what is possible and desirable in a polity. The commonplaces that inform transformative rhetoric are different to those offered by the neoliberal mode of discourse.

I have shown that the rhetorical invention of the British environmental state was grounded on the vocabulary of the neoliberal governing rationality. This is indicative of the pervasive logic of neoliberalism and hence of its ability to shape rhetoric, to function as a tank for ideas, arguments, and commonplaces that decisively formulate mainstream public discourse. Neoliberalism remains influential in political culture not least because of its ability to adjust to new problems and colonise new areas of activity and weave its commonplaces into the fabric of public discourse. The possibility of transformation entails undoing this very fabric by inserting a new vocabulary that sustains and promotes different ideas and visions to the ones subscribed to neoliberalism. In Britain the agents of neoliberal discourse created and forged a green common sense by infusing public language with a vocabulary that became entrenched in the public’s understanding of environmental problems and solutions. Actual environmental transformation entails the re-invention of the environmental state and the disruption of the current green common sense.

The metaphor of the glass ceiling is instructive about the nature of this challenge and provides orientation on how to address it. Once we visualise neoliberalism as an obstacle to an alternative arrangement, one that is visible but seemingly out of reach, we can grasp how

neoliberalism exercises its grip. Indeed, one of the greatest advantages of neoliberalism is that it gives the illusion of freedom of choice, only to restrict this choice to whatever serves its survival. With its exhortation of flexibility and adjustability (Davies 2016), neoliberalism appears to be like transparent like glass, open and hospitable to change. In fact, it is exactly the opposite: it functions as a ceiling that has to protect its own viability by separating what works for it from what would endanger its survival. The 2008 financial crisis is instructive here; it illustrates that uncertainty is built into neoliberalism and that disruption and change do not threaten but actually strengthen it (Mirowski 2013). In environmental policymaking, visions for transformation towards sustainability hit the glass ceiling of neoliberalism and take the form of solutions that fall under the rubric of ‘green economy’, which resonates with the spirit of freedom of choice that neoliberalism claims to endorse. To break the glass ceiling of neoliberalism, currently non-hegemonic visions and their rhetoric need to be institutionalised and become part of the tangible, material reality, as well as the common sense of the public.

The re-invention of the environmental state entails a paradigm shift: a complete redefinition of the aims of the political community, of what counts as common good, and of what is part of common sense. This process entails a fundamental change in the commonplaces that inform the hegemonic socio-political paradigm and common sense. It entails substituting a collaborative project of collective and individual agency for the economisation of every aspect of life through evaluation, efficiency, and competitiveness. Relevant ideas have already been introduced into public discourse by agents of alternative economic and social formations that seek to demolish growth from its holy altar and that suggest the invention of a new, less exploitative, economic paradigm (Calisto Friant and Langmore 2015; D’alica, Demaria, and Kallis 2015; Beling et al. 2018). Such alternative paradigms make environmental issues integral rather than peripheral to the design and

materialisation of socio-economic arrangements where commonplaces such as degrowth, wellbeing, commoning, and cooperation provide orientation. Such arguments still lack the credibility that would enable them to acquire hegemonic status and become common sense. For as long as the environmental state is founded on the commonplaces of neoliberalism and uses a coloured version of growth—‘green growth’—as its driving force for the design and implementation of environmental policy, transformation will remain a utopia discussed in academic journals and grandiose speeches delivered at international summits, rather than an actual political aim.

Long-term environmental sustainability remains more of a social and political vision than reality. I showed why the idea of the environmental state qua neoliberal state is part of the failure to achieve the necessary transformation towards sustainability. I did so by scrutinising the documents that provided orientation for the mechanisms and measures through which the British environmental state is rhetorically constituted and so by identifying the commonplaces that informed arguments that invented it rhetorically. Finally, I argued that radical environmental transformation would require the mobilisation of a transformative rhetoric that would use as its inventional resources concepts that encapsulate ideas different to those promoted by the neoliberal logic. Political language may not exhaust social and political reality, but it certainly gives it shape and orientation.

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